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W400 Writing Narrative Final Draft

Never Too Young

When you’re too young to understand letters sent home from school without mom and dad reading them to you, such missives fail to illicit the responses older students might offer – from trepidation to excitement according to the nature of the notice and prior actions of the receiving party. An official yellow piece of paper stuffed in your backpack at the end of the school day is a matter for “grown-ups,” not first-graders.

This letter turned out to be different, however. After the yellow letter came crumpled out of my backpack, every Saturday morning for about two months that winter I spent at my school, in my classroom. We sat at the familiar round tables with small chairs of varying colors. Most of the kids sitting around the table with me were my age, yet unfamiliar; however, a few of my classmates at Hershey Elementary were sitting with me. They must’ve gotten the yellow papers, too. One boy I played with during recess was there, Josh. Josh with brown hair and blue eyes.

Our teacher was new to me and had brown hair, too. Wavy, down to her waist. She pushed it behind her shoulder as she passed out blank sheets of paper to all of us kids. With a sunny and encouraging voice she asked us to picture in our heads what an “elegant lady” or a “sophisticated gentleman” would look like: What would this lady wear? Where would such a gentleman go? What does a lady or gentleman do? What sorts of things do these fine folks admire?

One boy in our group asked, “What’s sophisticated?” after the teacher tried her best to explain it to us.

We had two assignments that day. First, with our pencils and limited spelling and grammar know-how we were to put into words what our minds pictured when we thought about our ideal, elegant, sophisticated ladies and gentleman. We also were asked to use crayons and markers to create a picture of how these fine gentleman and ladies would step out into the world being so sophisticated and elegant.

My lady was quite independent and spirited. She only wore high heels and fancy dresses, of course. An exquisite handbag was slung casually over her wrist, and that scraggly red-crayon mouth seemed to convey an attitude of delight and spontaneity to anyone who may have glanced her way. I wrote about what kind of person she was – adventurous, stylish, kind and fun— what kind of person I would like to be when I got old enough to be elegant, I supposed.

When everyone finished our work it was time to go home. I don’t think we knew what we were doing exactly, besides writing and drawing; this experience was like school in that we had to sit and listen and do school-y things, but it was different. It was fun telling stories. And after all, we had gotten the yellow paper saying we were invited to be here.

During the rest of our time spent around those tables we got to write stories about lots of things, and sometimes from our own ideas. Our teacher read some stories we had written out loud and gave us time to use our imaginations, our creativity. I think we all liked being told we were creative. Maybe that meant we were on our way to being elegant and sophisticated!

Near to the end of our time together our teacher, with her smiley face and skinny hands, passed out more papers and asked us to recopy three or four of our favorite stories and corresponding drawings. I felt the need to do these in my most careful handwriting, with the best colors out of the crayon box because our teacher was going to take them and print them, make them into books. Then we were to come to an important event with our families at the school, on another Saturday, to read everything we had written and see everything we had drawn in published form. We would get to read the things our classmates wrote. Other people were coming too, to see what we had made.

I had a special dress. Purple with flowers and lace. My mom was sick that morning so my dad dressed up as well. At school, the cafeteria was filled with long tables which were covered in our books. And people leaning over the tables. Reading. Looking. Writing.

There was Jessica’s book, with the pipe cleaner design on the front. I lightly touched the flowers and opened the cover, discovering the stories she had written about her dog, about her family, about her elegant lady. I found Josh’s book. It had stories about playing outside with his friends, and his sophisticated man had a big briefcase and a funny hat. I liked these stories. Dad walked with me and looked, too. Then we found my book. People had written nice things in the back about my stories, my elegant lady. They liked her outfit. They thought I was imaginative.

Just then, a lady with big jewelry and colorful clothes came and bent over to see me. She told me she liked my stories, that she thought I would be a good writer some day. Dad told me she was a state representative, someone who was part of the government, like Grandpa Lietz was a mayor only she had to take care of more people than a mayor.

I came home that night and told mom all about the books and the people and showed her what people had written to me, since we got to take our books with us. We were done going to school on Saturdays. Mom gave me hugs and told me she was proud of me, and made me sit in front of the television. She turned on the VCR and it made its fast, revving sound. On the tape she had recorded the news because the TV people had been at our special event and I was on TV, too. My book, my story, in a close-up shot. There was our teacher, with her long hair. She wore a nice dress that day, like my elegant lady.

Though I didn’t fully appreciate it in 1987, taking part in the Indiana Young Author’s Conference was a hugely formative experience. Our teacher came to work with us because she believed in the importance of what kids have to say, that kids can and need and want to practice being creative and expressive. She gave us a freedom to invent and dream and imagine who we wanted to be and what we had to say about that.

The experience instilled in me a sense of universal connection, as each of us human beings has something important to say and a capacity to create something unique. It called up in me a desire to participate in the sharing of our creativities. When we share with one another I believe we can more fully appreciate, draw meaning from and change our world for the better. What a powerful truth to reveal to a child! This is the kind of transformative encouragement I want to give others— especially my future students and regardless of a special conference invitation – as I continue to live it out in my own sphere of creativity.